

August 29, 2005

VICKSBURG, MS — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is on the scene now assessing the levee situation and inspecting locations in the New Orleans vicinity. Working with local, state and federal authorities, the Corps is providing direct assistance to stabilize the levees and water flow in the city.

Teams of Corps employees are geographically dispersed to facilitate assessments and operations. The District Engineer, Col. Richard Wagenaar, and a team are working out of an emergency operations shelter in New Orleans, another team is in Baton Rouge, a crisis action team is colocated at the Vicksburg District, MS, and a fourth team is working with FEMA at the Memphis District, TN. A Saint Louis District team is co-located in Vicksburg and will assume the New Orleans District's civil works mission.

District employees on the ground in New Orleans are currently assessing the situation at the 17th Street Canal floodwall that was breached overnight, Monday. Corps engineers believe that water over-topped the floodwall scoured behind the wall and caused it to collapse. A second breach occurred on the Industrial Canal during the storm. These closures are essential so that water can be removed from the city.

The Corps' top priority is to protect the citizens there and to close the breaches. The Corps is working with the U.S. Coast Guard, Army National Guard and other state and federal authorities to bring in all assets available to expedite the process.

"We're attempting to contract for materials, such as rock, super sand bags, cranes, etc., and also for modes of transportation - like barges and helicopters, to close the gap and stop the flow of water from Lake Pontchartrain into the city," said Walter Baummy, Engineering Division chief and project manager for closing the breach.

One of the largest drainage pumping stations in the world, Pumping Station 6, is a major facility used to remove water from the city into Lake Ponchartrain via the canals. To unwater the city, the floodwall gap must be closed without impeding the water flow in the canal out into the lake.

The Corps is strategizing with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, the East Jefferson Levee District and Orleans Levee District, to locate materials and access to the breach area.

The New Orleans District's 350 miles of hurricane levee were built to withstand a fast-moving Category 3 storm. The fact that Katrina, a category 4-plus hurricane, didn't cause more damage is a testament to the structural integrity of the hurricane levee protection system.

For more information, contact the New Orleans District Public Affairs Office at the crisis action center (601) 631-5328.